CHILD PARTICIPATION IN
THE EUROPEAN FORUM ON THE RIGHTS OF THE CHILD

Introductory Note

This paper has been prepared by the NGO Action Group on the EU’s Child Rights Strategy (Action Group). It is intended as a discussion paper setting out some of the basic principles and standards required for the meaningful and safe participation of children in the European Forum on the Rights of the Child. It is based on the many years of experience of the different networks and international organisations who work directly with children and young people in Europe and in developing countries. The principles and standards described below are based on known best practice in children’s participation in other national and international events and projects.

However, the Action Group would like to emphasise that whilst some suggestions are given on how children’s participation should best be organised, the exact mechanisms (selection of participants, expert groups, etc.) should be worked out in consultation with children and young people themselves. We therefore propose that the next European Forum on the Rights of the Child focuses specifically on children’s participation. Child Participation applies across both the internal and external policy, practice and programming of the European Union. The European Forum should involve representatives (children, young people and adults) from existing participation structures from across Europe to enable a discussion on best practice in inclusion, peer leadership and influence of policy making. It should also set the ‘Rules of Procedure’ for children’s participation in future European Forums on the Rights of the Child, including the participation of children from countries external to the European Union.

1. PURPOSE AND MANDATE OF THE EUROPEAN FORUM ON THE RIGHTS OF THE CHILD

According to the EC’s Communication “Towards an EU Strategy on the Rights of the Child” the Forum will:

- strengthen communication among the main stakeholders
- contribute to the design and monitoring of EU actions and act as an arena for exchange of good practice.
- promote and strengthen networking and children’s representation in the EU and globally, with a view to formally involving them in all consultations and actions related to their rights and needs

1 COM(2006) 367 Final
The Action Group strongly believes that child participation must also be considered one of the main aims of the Forum because

- it is a right\(^2\)
- children are key informants, as well as mandated representatives of their constituencies (other children)
- the CR Communication commits to involving children in decision making process 2007 onwards. The Forum is one of the few mechanisms available to children for participating in EU policy/practice. The Forum should be a starting point, and a model for interaction by children with the EU in third countries. (See text from the Communication which says “[t]he Commission will consider how it can replicate this mechanism in third countries where the EC Delegations could initiate systematic dialogue with international and national partners active in the field of children’s rights”)

2. PRINCIPLES OF CHILD PARTICIPATION

For children’s participation to be effective is must follow two core principles:

- **Meaningful participation** (not just of children but also of all participants)
- **Safe participation**

**PRINCIPLE 1: MEANINGFUL PARTICIPATION**

The definition of ‘meaningful participation’, although needing to be further refined and discussed by the participants themselves, should be based on the following basic principles\(^3\):

- **Ethical** – means a commitment to transparency, honesty and accountability that ensures respect for and guarantees the dignity of all participants, especially children.

- **Non-discriminatory** – meaning that all children have an equal opportunity to be involved.

  *This means that the processes of selection of child representatives is inclusive; and the operation of the Forum itself – for example, from physical access to the allocation of speaking time- provides equal opportunities for all to participate.***

- **‘Child-friendly’** - means creating an enabling environment in which children are able to contribute to the best of their abilities.

  *We would expect this includes the commitment of adult stakeholders to the participation of children and provision of competent adult facilitators to assist children in fully participating in the Forum.*

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\(^2\) UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, Articles 12, 13, 15

\(^3\) Adapted from ‘Promoting Children’s Participation in the UN Global Violence Against Children Study. A short guide for members of the NGO Advisory Panel and others.’ Save the Children Alliance, Sept 2003. Further explanation of these principles is provided in this paper.

[http://www.savethechildren.net/alliance/resources/chpart_childrenviolence.doc](http://www.savethechildren.net/alliance/resources/chpart_childrenviolence.doc)
PRINCIPLE 2: SAFE PARTICIPATION

Safe – participation that promotes the safety and protection of children.

Child Protection is Critical!
It is absolutely critical that proper child protection procedures are followed rigorously to avoid negative experiences for children or adult participants. This requires adequate training and orientation for all the staff involved in organising the event including the admin team, media relations people, security and hospitality staff, etc.

Use existing resources to design child participation for the Forum!
A detailed “Minimum Standards for Consulting with Children” and “Operations Manual on Children’s Participation at Consultations” were prepared for a Regional Consultation for the UN Study on Violence against Children. These provide minimum standards and detailed guidelines, forms and briefing papers for preparing and managing children’s and young people participation. The minimum standards are a minimum precisely because they are the basic framework of safeguarding children’s interests. The Forum cannot accept anything less than the basic standards to protect children. It is expected that any future event involving children should make use of and adapt these existing documents, for example the Under 18 Delegate and Adult Delegate forms, and basic behavioural protocols for child protection/safety standards. All participants to the Forum should read and confirm understanding and acceptance of the standards set out in these documents.

All of these principles underwrite the minimum standards/requirements of the Forum’s modus operandi and form the basis of our suggestions and the budget.

3. SELECTION OF CHILD REPRESENTATIVES

As mentioned, the procedures for selection of child representatives to attend the Forum should be discussed and agreed with existing networks in the EU Member States that are involved with child participation.

Some of the basic principles that should underwrite selection criteria include:

- Age and informed consent of child representative (and consent of their parents)
- Knowledge and experience of issues, and this form of representation
- Representativeness – process of being mandated by peers
- Established feedback mechanism to each child representative’s ‘constituency’ and commitment of the child delegate to act as a child representative.
- Inclusiveness – the Forum should aim to ensure that different groups are represented throughout the participatory processes for selection for example under-represented groups including ethnic minorities, disabled, young carers, gay and lesbian, homeless etc. The Forum should also aim to have a good gender balance of participants.

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• Willingness by child to engage with external as well as internal issues – alternatively the child representatives could change according to the issues for discussion
• Will not negatively impact on academic/personal life by making this commitment.

It is anticipated that future Forums will have one child representative per EU Member State (accompanied by an Accompanying Adult). However, it is recommended that each country have a reserve representative, in case the principal delegate is unable to attend. In order to achieve gender balance it is recommended that the principal and reserve representative should include both a girl and boy.

The Action Group believes that future Forums should also involve children from countries outside the European Union. How this will be achieved will have to be subject to further discussion in the next Forum with children themselves. Depending on the topic chosen for discussion at a Forum, children selected from EU Member States could themselves mandate children from other countries to talk on their behalf on a specific topic or area. This should be determined through discussion with children in non-EU countries and the local EC Delegations, and the Forum stakeholders. It should be noted that children from countries external to the European Union have already indicated their interest and willingness to engage with the EU through consultation conducted by members of the NGO Action Group and presented at the European Parliament Hearing on the Communication: “Towards an EU Strategy on the Rights of the Child”.

4. EXPERT GROUPS

The Action Group believes that, alongside the Forum, it is essential that there are ‘Expert Groups’ both of adults and children that will undertake the preparatory work for the Forum, acting as an expert group to support the work of the Commission, and ensure ownership of the Forum by the key stakeholders.

Child Expert Group
The exact composition and mandate of the child expert group should be decided in consultation with children at the next Forum. At this stage it is difficult to determine the exact number and make up of the group. It is expected to be a sub set of the group of child representatives selected for the forum. It is anticipated that the selected group of children will have a key role in ensuring that the key stakeholders listen and respond to the demands of children both within the Forum and afterwards.

It is proposed that the Children’s Expert group should:

• be a group where children from across the European Union and the world can meet to discuss and raise issues of importance to children that can be addressed by the EU
• propose the agenda and nominate appropriate speakers for the Forum by choosing topics from proposals submitted by its own members together with the Adult Expert Group (where at least half the topics to be discussed at the Forum come from the Children’s Expert Group)
ensure the compilation of existing research, survey or other material for input to
the European Forum
liaise with the Adult Expert Group
participate in the Forum meetings
follow up on recommendations and conclusions from the Forum

Adult Expert Group
It is anticipated that the ‘adult’ expert group will carry overall responsibility for the
preparation of the Forum Agenda, which will include the topics proposed by children.
They must be required to liaise with and give feedback to the Child Expert Group on
Forum preparation and follow up.

5. ORGANISATION OF CHILD PARTICIPATION AT THE FORUM

For meaningful children’s participation we consider that the following organisational
issues need to be considered:

Key Definitions – Roles and Responsibilities

There are recognised roles and responsibilities in the organisation of any event directly
involving children. These include for example:

Under 18 Delegate: Any participant in a consultation who is under 18 years old.

Adult Delegate: Any participant in a consultation who is over 18 years old.

Accompanying adult: An Adult accompanying an Under 18 Delegate. Accompanying
adults have responsibility for all aspects of the Under 18 Delegate’s
rights, safety and welfare.

Local Partner: An organisation responsible for selecting, preparing and following-up
with children who participate at the consultation.

Child Protection Focal Person: A person who is responsible for child protection at an
event, for running a complaints procedure and ensuring everyone at
the consultation is appropriately briefed on the child protection policy.

Children’s Participation Co-ordinator:A person who is responsible for co-ordinating
activities related to children’s participation at a consultation,
managing staff (the Support Team) and liaising between Local
Partners and an Organising Committee.

Facilitator: A person who is responsible for ‘facilitating’ or making easy children’s
capacity to express their views in public using a variety of techniques.
Facilitators are generally employed specifically for consultations, they
are different people to the Accompanying adults, who are responsible
for the Under 18 Delegate’s rights, safety and welfare.

Timing

Owing to the logistical complexity, high cost (and demands on children’s time), we
anticipate that meaningful children’s participation is only possible in one Forum per year.
However, we believe that it is important in this case for the adults to report back to children on what has been done, following their specific demands and inputs in the previous Forum. We also propose that extra time be given to children before and after the Forum to ensure proper preparation and feedback.

- We would suggest that the children have a minimum of 2 full-days for getting to know one another and preparation for the Forum before the Forum meeting. The Forum itself should take place over one full day and involve all stakeholders. A half-day meeting for children should be organised after the event for debriefing, evaluation and follow-up.

**Child Friendly Documentation and Presentations**

- Any declarations or outputs from the Forum must be produced in an adult and child friendly version

- Key documents should be provided *in advance* and translated into child friendly language. Child friendly documents should be made available in all official EU languages

- Experts also need to be prepared to present in a non-academic manner – if children are going to be able to access the information easily

- Presentations in plenary need to be interpreted into all official EU languages using a child friendly format, which is respectful of the need to be patient and exact. Interpretation in smaller discussions, such as working groups, can be replaced with ‘whisper translation’ into participants’ local/national languages, as necessary. Facilitators will be sensitive to ensure time and space for expression in children’s first language, with time for translation to enable everyone to actively participate.

**Working Groups**

- There should be a mixture of plenary and working groups at the Forum –Plenary formats tend to favour adults participation, reduce dialogue and promote political statements over content. At least 50% of the Forum event should be carried out through working groups – that should involve both adults and children

- Facilitators for working groups should be trained in Child Participation methods. We recommend that Children and Adults are not always separated, although, we recognise there may be occasions when this is more effective – for example decision making on the basis of children’s feedback.

As part of everyone’s commitment to meaningful participation, all forum *members* are expected to attend *all* sessions. Otherwise children could find themselves segregated whilst adults leave to discuss ‘more important things’.

**Evaluation**

- Adults and children to provide feedback to Adult Expert Group on Forum, including on their experience of participation.
**Costs:**
This is a non-exhaustive list of cost items that must be considered in the organisation of the Child Expert Group meeting and children’s participation in the European Forum
- Insurance: Travel & Medical, Children and Accompanying adults
- Travel – Children and Accompanying Adults (to and from Group meeting)
- Translators (including for children’s sessions)
- Facilitators – Travel and Fees (2-4 people for Children’s Forum, probably 10 for the Forum)
- Resources – computers, pens, paper etc
- Accommodation – (2-3 nights) for all participants and support staff.
- Meeting Room
- Travel inside city
- Co-ordinator of Meeting – How many man hours?
- Child Protection Focal Point – How many man hours?
- Admin Support - How many man hours?
- Documents – production, translation, dissemination

If participation of children from third countries is anticipated further cost items include:
- Support for Visas, travel, passports etc
- Cost of Translators
- Accommodation 3-4 nights

Please also note, children (or adults) with disabilities may also require extra funding to ensure they can participate fully in the Forum and other Groups. This should be allowed for in the budget planning.